A FABLE: BELFAGOR, THE DEVIL WHO TOOK A WIFE

EDITORS' NOTE

The popularity of the novella form, a literary genre similar to the short story, began with the appearance of Boccaccio's Decameron in the fourteenth century. Following this model, a number of Renaissance writers in Italy, France, England, and Spain (Anton Francesco Grazzini, Matteo Bandello, Marguerite de Navarre, Cervantes, and others) made the novella the most popular fictional genre of the age. In general, each of these writers employed a frame story to open the collection of stories, which described how, as a result of some special event (a plague in Boccaccio's work; a festival, carnival, or storm in other novellas), a number of narrators gathered to tell stories in order to pass the time. Thus, most of these works combined the opening frame with many different tales, on a variety of topics, told by a number of different narrators. Part of the charm of this genre was due to the urbane and witty commentaries on the various stories that the frame characters provided However, a few novellas existed as individual, autonomous stories with no frame or companion pieces. One of these single stories was Luigi da Porto's tale of Romeo and Juliet, which eventually made its way to England and Shakespeare through a number of translations and versions. Another such masterpiece was Machiavelli's Belfagor, the only novella of his we have preserved It is the equal of any other single story that Renaissance Europe produced. Moreover, from an anecdote which Bandello recounts in his own collection of such tales (I, xl), it seems clear that Machiavelli enjoyed a reputation as a skillful storyteller among his close friends and associates. Scholars date the composition of this novella between 1515 and 1520; it was first published in the 1549 edition of Machiavelli's complete works.

It is written, in the old chronicles of Florentine history, how a most holy man, whose life was well known to those who lived at that time, prayed with religious fervor and saw that, among the countless number of miserable souls who die outside

God's grace and go to Hell, all (or the greatest portion of them) complained that it was only because of their wives that they had been brought to such misery. Whereupon Minos and Rhadamanthos, along with all the other judges of Hell, were very perplexed. They were not able to believe that these accusations against the fairer sex were true, but the complaints increased daily. So they made an appropriate report to Pluto, who decided to make a thorough investigation of the matter with the help of all the princes of Hell, and to take whatever action might be deemed best in order to discover the falsity or truth of this question. Having called them all to a council, Pluto spoke in this manner:

"My very dear friends, since by heavenly decree and unchangeable destiny I am the owner of this kingdom, I cannot be obliged to submit to any earthly or heavenly judgment; nevertheless, because the ultimate proof of prudence in those who hold great power is to submit themselves to the rule of law and to value the opinions of others, I have decided to ask your advice on how to act in a matter that could bring shame to our rule. Since the souls of all the men who come into our kingdom say that their wives were the cause, and since this seems impossible to us, I am afraid that if we accept their explanations we might very well be accused of being too credulous, yet if we do not we might be accused of not being stem enough and, hence, poor friends of justice. Now, since one is the vice of the frivolous and the other that of the unjust, and since we wish to avoid being accused of either, we have —being unable to find the means—called you together so that you may aid us with your advice in order that this realm, which has always lived free from scandal in the past, may continue to do so in the future."

Each of the princes believed the matter to be of the utmost importance and worthy of much consideration; all concluded that it was necessary to get to the bottom of the issue, but none could agree on how it should be done. While some felt that one, and others that several, of their number should be sent into the world in human shape to discover the truth in person, many others felt it could be done without so much fuss by forcing a number of souls to reveal the truth under various kinds of torture. Since the majority was of the opinion to send someone back to earth, that course of action was adopted. Unable to find anyone who would undertake this task of his own free will, they decided that lots should be drawn. The lot fell upon Belfagor, an archdevil, formerly an archangel before his fall from Heaven. Although Belfagor was reluctant to carry out this task, he was nevertheless compelled by the authority of Pluto to follow the council's instructions and agreed to heed those conditions which they had solemnly decided upon among themselves. They were: that a hundred thousand ducats would be disbursed immediately to

whoever was chosen for the mission; with this money he was to go into the world and, disguised in the body of a man, he was to take a wife and to live with her for ten years; then he was to pretend to die and return to his superiors in order to report on the burdens and discomforts of marriage based on his experience. It was further agreed that during this period he was to be subject to all the inconveniences and evils that men suffer, including poverty, imprisonment, disease, and every other kind of misfortune that men experience—unless he could avoid all this by means of his own wit or trickery.

So, Belfagor accepted the conditions and the money and entered the world. Accompanied by his retinue of servants and horsemen, he entered Florence with a flourish. He chose to live in this city above all others because he felt it was the most likely place to live for anyone who was fond of usury. He took the name Roderigo of Castile and rented a house in the Ognissanti district; and in order not to reveal his true identity, he said that he had left Spain as a child and had gone to Syria, and that he had made a fortune in Aleppo, whence he had departed for Italy in order to take a wife in a place that was more civilized, more urbane, and more in keeping with his own character. Roderigo was a very handsome man and looked about thirty years old. Having demonstrated in only a few days how rich he was, and having given evidence of his humanity and liberality, many noble Florentines with a number of daughters (but little money) offered them to him. From among all these Roderigo chose a very beautiful girl named Onesta, the daughter of Amerigo Donati, who had three other daughters of marriageable age as well as three sons. And although Amerigo came from a very noble family and was highly respected in Florence, in proportion to the size of his family and his nobility, he was nevertheless very poor.

Roderigo organized a magnificent, splendid wedding; he omitted nothing that one might desire in a celebration of this kind. And since he was subject to all human passions (because of the rule imposed upon him before he left Hell), he began to take pleasure in the pomp and circumstance of the world and to enjoy being praised by other men—a thing that was by no means inexpensive. Moreover, he had not lived long with Madonna Onesta before he fell madly in love with her, he could not bear to see her unhappy or displeased. Now, Onesta brought with her to Roderigo's house, together with her nobility and her beauty, more pride than Lucifer ever had, and Roderigo who had experienced them both, judged his wife's pride to be the greater. And her pride increased when she discovered how much her husband loved her; since she thought she could dominate him in every way, she ordered him about without pity or respect, nor did she hesitate to speak to him in injurious or vile

terms when he refused to give her something. All of this was, for Roderigo, the cause of much misery. Nevertheless, respect for his father-in-law, her brothers, relatives, the obligation of matrimony, and, above all, the great love he had for her made him patient. I shall not even mention the extravagant expenses incurred to make her happy: dressing her in the newest fashions and keeping her in the latest novelties which our city habitually changes. In addition, to keep peace with her it was necessary to help her father marry off the other daughters, and great sums of money were consumed in this project. Besides this, since he wished to be on good terms with her he was obliged to send one of her brothers to the East with cloth, another to the West with silks, and to open a jewelry shop for the third in Florence. In these ventures he spent the greater part of his fortune. In addition to all this, during carnival time and St. John's Day, when the entire city customarily made merry and many rich and noble citizens honored each other with sumptuous banquets, Madonna Onesta, so as not to be inferior to other women, wanted her Roderigo to surpass all the others in giving such parties. Roderigo bore all these tribulations for the reasons already given; nor would they have seemed onerous if he had been rewarded with peace and quiet at home and if he had been able to await the day of his ruin in tranquillity. But the opposite occurred, for in addition to these crushing expenses, Onesta's arrogant nature brought him countless problems. As a result, there was not a servant who could stand being in his house for more than a few days; and Roderigo was sorely inconvenienced by not having a faithful servant to whom he could entrust his af fairs; even those devils that Roderigo had brought with him as part of his retinue preferred to return to the fires of Hell rather than to live in the world under Onesta's authority.

Thus, living such a tumultuous and unsettled life and having already consumed all his ready cash in extravagant expenditures, Roderigo began to live in the hope of the profits he expected from his Eastern and Western investments. Because his credit was still good, he kept up his standard of living by signing promissory notes, and it soon became obvious to those who deal in that kind of business that a great many of these notes were in circulation. When his situation was already precarious, news suddenly arrived from the East and the West: one of Madonna Onesta's brothers had gambled away all of Roderigo's goods, and the other, returning on a boat laden with his uninsured merchandise, had gone down with the cargo.

No sooner had this news leaked out than Roderigo's creditors met and declared him bankrupt. Unable to take legal action against him, since his notes were not yet due, they concluded that it would be a good idea to keep an eye on him so that he might not run away in secret. Roderigo, on the other hand, seeing no way out of his

dilemma, and knowing that his infernal powers were limited by his agreement, decided to flee at all costs; one morning he escaped on horseback through the Gate of Prato, which was near where he lived. No sooner was his departure discovered than a great commotion arose among the creditors, who ran to the magistrates and dispatched couriers after him, as well as a mob of people.

When the alarm was sounded, Roderigo had not gotten more than a mile from the city; so, seeing himself in trouble, he decided to leave the main road and set off across the fields in order to flee more secretly. But he was prevented from doing so by the many ditches that crossed the countryside. Since he could no longer go on horseback, he left the animal on the road and began to flee on foot, crossing field after field covered with those vines and canes so abundant in the countryside until he arrived above Peretola, at the house of Gianmatteo del Brica, a workman of Giovanni Del Bene. As luck would have it, he found Gianmatteo coming home to feed his oxen. He asked for his help, promising him that if he would save him from the hands of his enemies (who were chasing him to let him rot in prison), he would make him a rich man, and that he would either give him proof of this before he left or he would put himself in the hands of his own pursuers if his friend was not satisfied. Gianmatteo, although a peasant, was no fool; realizing that he had nothing to lose by saving Roderigo, he agreed and pushed him under a pile of manure in front of his house, covering him with reeds and other garbage he had collected there for burning.

No sooner had Roderigo been hidden than his pursuers arrived. In spite of their threats they were unable to force Gianmatteo to say that he had seen him. And so, they continued on and, having searched in vain that day and the next, they returned dead tired to Florence. When the noise had died away, Gianmatteo released Roderigo from his hiding place and asked him to fulfill his promise. In reply Roderigo said: “My brother, I am deeply in your debt and want to satisfy you in every way; and so that you may believe what I can do, I shall tell you who I am.” And then he told him about the kind of being he was and about the laws governing his stay outside of Hell and about the wife he had taken; furthermore, he explained how he was going to make Gianmatteo rich. The method was to be this: whenever he heard that some woman had become possessed, he should count on the fact that it was Roderigo possessing her and that he would never leave the woman unless Gianmatteo came to exorcise him. This way he could get as much money as he wished from the girl’s parents. When this agreement was reached, he left.

Not many days passed before word spread through all of Florence that a daughter of Ambruogio Amidei, married to Bonaiuto Tedalducci, was possessed; the family

tried all the remedies that are normally used in such cases: placing the head of St. Zanobius and the cloak of Saint Giovanni Gualberto on her head, all of which merely made Roderigo laugh. And in order to make it clear that the girl's illness was due to a spirit and not to some imaginary fantasy, he spoke in Latin, debated philosophical questions, and uncovered the sins of many, one of which concerned a friar who had kept a woman in his cell dressed as a novice for more than four years. Such things amazed everyone. Messer Ambruogio, as a result, was very unhappy. He had tried every remedy in vain and had lost all hope of curing his daughter when Gianmatteo came to him and promised him the health of his daughter if he would give him five hundred florins to buy a farm at Peretola. Messer Ambruogio accepted the offer. Whereupon Gianmatteo, after having first said some masses and performed some ceremonies to dress up the operation, approached the girl's ear and said: "Roderigo, I have come to find you so that you can keep your word." To which Roderigo answered: "I am happy to do so. But this is not sufficient to make you rich. Therefore, when I leave here I shall possess the daughter of King Charles of Naples and will never leave her but for you. You can then get anything you wish. After that, don't bother me anymore." Having said that, he left the girl, to the pleasure and admiration of all Florence.

Not long after that, all Italy heard about the tragedy that had befallen the daughter of King Charles. Being unable to find a cure, and having received word of Gianmatteo, the king sent to Florence for him. Gianmatteo, upon arriving in Naples, cured the girl after a few ceremonies. But Roderigo, before he left the girl, said: "See, Gianmatteo, I have fulfilled my promises to make you rich. Now we are even and I am bound to you no longer. Therefore, I would be happy if you did not cross my path again, for I shall harm you in the future just as I have helped you in the past." Therefore, when Gianmatteo returned to Florence a very rich man (he had received more than fifty thousand ducats from the king), he thought of enjoying those riches peacefully, never dreaming that Roderigo meant to harm him. But his intentions were abruptly upset by the news that arrived: a daughter of King Louis VII of France was possessed. Gianmatteo found this news most disturbing, considering both the power of that king and the words of warning from Roderigo. Being unable to find a cure for his daughter and hearing about Gianmatteo, the king first asked for his aid by messenger. But when Gianmatteo claimed that he was indisposed, the king was forced to turn to the city government, which obliged Gianmatteo to obey. So he went, disheartened, to Paris, where he first explained to the king that even though he had cured a few women possessed by devils in the past, this did not mean that he knew how, or would be able, to cure all such cases,

for there were some demons of such a treacherous nature that they did not fear threats, incantations, or any religious power; but in spite of all that he was ready to do his duty, and he begged the king's pardon and forgiveness if he failed. To this the troubled king replied that he would hang him if he failed to cure her. Gianmatteo was greatly disturbed by this; nevertheless, he screwed up his courage and had the possessed girl brought forward. Leaning close to her ear, he humbly asked Roderigo's aid, reminding him of the service he had rendered him and what an example of ingratitude it would be if he abandoned him now in his hour of need. To this Roderigo replied: "What, you vile traitor? Do you dare come before me? Did you think you could boast about having made yourself rich by my work? I am going to show you and everyone else how I, too, can give and take away as I please. Before you leave here I shall see that you are hanged."

Since Gianmatteo saw no other way out, he decided to try his luck in another way. The possessed girl having been taken away, he said to the king: "Sire, as I told you, there are many demons so malevolent that one cannot deal with them, and this one is of that type. Nevertheless, I would like to try one last experiment; if it succeeds, Your Majesty and I shall obtain our end; if not, I am at your mercy and you can grant me such compassion as my innocence merits. Meanwhile, have a huge scaffold built in the square, before the church of Notre Dame, of sufficient size to hold all the lords and the clergy of this city; have it covered with cloth of silk and gold, and have an altar built above it. Next Sunday morning I want you and the clergy and all your princes and barons to assemble on it with regal pomp and with magnificent robes. After the celebration of a solemn mass, have the possessed girl brought forward. Furthermore, I want there to be in one corner of the square at least twenty men with trumpets, horns, drums, bagpipes, flutes, cymbals, and any other instrument that makes noise. When I raise my hat, they are to play on their instruments as they advance toward the scaffold. I believe that all of these things, together with certain other secret remedies, will make this spirit depart."

The king ordered everything to be done at once. When Sunday morning arrived, the scaffold was full of important people and the piazza teeming with commonfolk. After the mass had been celebrated, the possessed girl was brought forward by two bishops and many noblemen. When Roderigo saw such a crowd gathered together and such preparations, he was almost stupefied, saying to himself: "What does this lazy peasant think he is doing? Does he think he can frighten me with these ceremonies? Doesn't he know that I am used to seeing the glories of Heaven and the furies of Hell? Whatever happens, I shall punish him!"

As Gianmatteo approached him and begged him to leave, he answered: “What a fine idea you have! What did you expect to accomplish with all these displays of yours? Did you think you could escape my power and the king’s wrath? Base peasant, I’ll surely have your neck.” While Gianmatteo repeated his pleas and the devil continued his insults, the former, deciding not to lose any more time, made a sign with his hat; all those who were designated to make noise began to sound their instruments, moving toward the scaffold with a clamor that rose all the way to Heaven. At the sound of this Roderigo pricked up his ears and, not knowing what it was and being very much amazed and stupefied, asked Gianmatteo what was going on. To this Gianmatteo replied excitedly: “Alas, Roderigo! It is your wife coming to reclaim you!”

What a marvel it was to behold the shock that the mere mention of his wife produced in Roderigo. It was so great that, without thinking about whether it was possible or probable for her to be there, and without a word, he fled in terror, leaving the girl cured, for he preferred to return to Hell to give an explanation of his actions rather than to live again with the many problems, dangers, and discomforts that marriage imposed upon him. Thus, Belfagor, on his return to Hell, testified to the evils that a wife brought into a household. And Gianmatteo, who knew more about such things than the devil, returned home a happy man.